



Center for Public Education



Research Brief

Community Schools: A Strategy Focusing on Student Needs and Parent Engagement

AN **nsba** PUBLICATION

Community Schools: A Strategy Focusing on Student Needs and Parent Engagement

Community schools are often described as a vision, a philosophy, a concept, and a strategy, rather than a program or a type of school. As of 2018, there were approximately 5,000 community schools in the United States. According to the [Coalition for Community Schools](#), “Community Schools is a local engagement strategy that creates and coordinates opportunities with its public schools to accelerate student success.” Community schools emphasize local-level decision making in response to their unique community needs.

The concept of community schools can be traced back to the early 20th century when industrialization, immigration, and urbanization were rapidly increasing, and public schools in cities were struggling to meet the social and civic needs of students from poor families. In the 1960s and 1970s, [advocacy groups](#) promoted community schools as a way to improve learning and address social issues, particularly in largely segregated and underfunded schools in urban centers unable to provide quality education to students.

Characteristics of Community Schools

In an early study on community schools ([Dryfoos, 2001](#)), researchers found that each community school was unique, but well-developed community schools shared the following three features:

- While a community school is operated in public school buildings, the school is open to students, families, and the community before, during, and after school, seven days a week, all year long. It is jointly operated through a partnership between the school system and one or more community agencies. Families, youth, principals, teachers, and neighborhood residents help design and implement activities that promote high educational achievement and positive youth development.
- The school is oriented toward the community, encouraging student learning through community service and service learning. A before-and after-school learning component encourages students to build on their classroom experiences, expand their horizons, contribute to their communities, and have fun. A family support center helps families with childrearing, employment, housing, immigration, and other services. Medical, dental, and mental health services are readily available. College faculty and students, business people, youth workers, neighbors, and family members come to support and bolster what schools are working hard to accomplish — ensuring young people’s academic, interpersonal, and career success.
- A full-time community school coordinator works in partnership with the principal.

In recent years, researchers ([Maier et al., 2017](#)) evaluated community schools again and concluded that well-implemented community schools are an effective strategy to improve schools. According to this study, community schools collaborate with community agencies and allocate resources to provide an “integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.” Depending on their local context, community schools vary in the programs they offer and the ways they operate. However, high-quality community schools demonstrate the following four features or pillars:

- Integrated student supports.
- Expanded learning time and opportunities.
- Family and community engagement.
- Collaborative leadership and practice.



Improving Student Performance

Community schools are often considered a vehicle for education reform. To measure the effectiveness of community schools regarding improved learning and achievement, researchers often examine multiple student achievement indicators, such as test scores, attendance, promotion, graduation, suspension, and expulsion. The following are some examples of schoolwide improvements on academic measures:

- [Charles Drew Elementary School](#), a participating school in the University of Pennsylvania's West Philadelphia Improvement Corps program, showed more improvement on the state's standardized reading and math tests than any other school in the state in 1999, an increase of 420 points.
- Through the state's Healthy Start grants, the Ontario-Montclair School District (California) established its community school models — [the Family Solutions and Montclair Community Collaboratives](#). By partnering with families and communities, overall, the District Academic Performance Indicator (API) has increased from 559 in 2001 to 740 in 2010. Students served by intensive case management services in 2008-09 attended school on average 3.3 more days than before the intervention (N=380). Students served by counseling programs in 2008-09 attended school on average 2.2 more days than before the intervention (N=729).
- At [Oakland International High School](#) (California), approximately 29% of students arrived in the United States as unaccompanied minors. Using the community school strategy, school leaders work closely with their community members and review student attendance and other data sources weekly to determine which students would benefit from case management, home visits, or other interventions. As a result, the 5-year graduation rate (including nontraditional paths for graduation) for the class of 2015 was 72%. More than half of the school's 2014–15 graduating students (51%) took and passed the rigorous A–G courses required for admission to California state universities, compared to 24% of their peers who were English learners in the district and 46% of all Oakland Unified School District students.
- [A 2008 evaluation](#) of after-school programs at six Children's Aid Society (CAS) community middle schools in New York City found that 45% of the students who were in CAS after-school programs from 2004 to 2007 demonstrated a steady increase in math performance levels compared to 37% of those students who did not attend—a statistically significant difference.
- An early [study](#) shows that at the Woodrow Wilson Middle School in Des Moines, Iowa, the rate of suspensions in 1995 was one-sixth the rate five years earlier. In a 2014 [study](#), "A first look at community schools in Baltimore," the average suspension rate decreased from 11.6 to 9.5 for community schools, and for the average number of students suspended multiple times in one year, the rate for community schools decreased from 2.5 to 1.8.



Improving Student Health

Community schools transform students' lives through partnerships with local businesses and service providers. The goal is for all students to have better access to health care, including dental and vision care.

- As a result of putting full-time school nurses in school sites in the Success Program in Des Moines Public Schools, 97% of students were immunized. Dental screenings produced a 34% increase in improved oral hygiene and a 36% decrease in referrals for cavities ([Dryfoos, 2001](#)).
- At Broad Acres Elementary School in Montgomery County (Maryland), a Linkages to Learning site, access to health care was greatly increased, reducing the proportion of families who reported no health care access for their children from 53% to 10%, and those with no insurance coverage from 38% to 10% ([Dryfoos, 2001](#)).
- According to [Sanders \(2016\)](#), in an urban school district in the eastern United States, the principal of a full-service community school, working with the community school coordinator, built expansive community partnerships that provided enriched extended learning activities, including a summer learning program and an after-school program with tutoring, homework help, and enrichment activities. The partnerships also offered site-based dental screenings, education, and referrals; mental health and counseling services; a music program; and Spanish and English classes. The community school coordinator was also able to help nearly 100 families secure supplemental nutritional assistance, eyeglasses, and clothing, and was able to address food and other needs within the community.

Transforming Neighborhoods

[Evidence](#) shows that safe neighborhoods benefit students in terms of their school performance, social behavior, and mental health. In Dryfoos's study ([Dryfoos, 2001](#)), six community schools reported lower violence rates and safer streets in their communities. An evaluation based on 138 grantees in California's Healthy Start initiative found that students receiving Healthy Start services decreased their drug use during the period of time receiving the services. The Blenheim School (Missouri Caring Communities site) reported a 40% decrease in disruptive behavioral incidents following the initiative of a system for referrals for clinical therapy.

- California's After-School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program operated in more than 963 schools serving approximately 97,000 students. An evaluation of the program during the 2000-01 school year found large improvements in achievement among the lowest-performing students in reading (4.2% of participants moved out of the lowest quartile on the SAT compared to only 1.9% of all students statewide) and in math (2.5% of participants moved out of the lowest quartile compared to only 1.9% statewide) ([Blank et al., 2003](#)).



- In Manchester (New Hampshire), a key element of the Manchester Community Schools Project is to make elementary schools centerpieces of community life in their neighborhoods for all residents, not just those with children. By allowing schools to serve as community centers (housing a variety of civic-related activities like block parties and watch groups), residents can more easily build social ties to one another, school personnel, and their neighborhoods more broadly. Schools also house community care coordinators who can direct residents to agencies related to the dimensions of health and well-being ([Young, 2015](#)).

Engaging Parents in Their Children's Education

Changing the culture of schools and neighborhoods often leads to more parental engagement in their children's education. For instance, Boston's James Otis Elementary School collaborated with Boston Excels to provide classes designed to help adults learn English in its low-income, largely Hispanic and Brazilian neighborhood. Parents used the same material their children used in school. As a result, parents and children shared and reinforced each other's learning. In 2000, Otis students outperformed the rest of the city's schools on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Systems test.

- In [Jeynes' 2017 meta-analysis](#), researchers examined the association between parental involvement and the academic achievement of Latino students in community schools. They found that parental involvement is related to positive outcomes among Latino youth.
- In a [2012 meta-analysis](#) of 51 studies, researchers examined different types of parental involvement programs and found that programs that emphasized teacher-parent partnerships had a significant positive relationship to student achievement for students of all ages. In these programs, parents and teachers worked together to develop common strategies, rules, guidelines, and expectations to support the student.

Another example is the Texas Alliance Schools (Blank et al., 2003). Since 1991, the Alliance Schools Initiative in Texas has focused on bringing parents together with teachers and community leaders to try to solve problems in schools, learn about school reform practices, and work together to address the needs of children and their families. The initiative focuses on restructuring the relationship among stakeholders in school communities, inducting parents, teachers, school administrators, students, community and business leaders, and public officials.

To change the culture of schools and neighborhoods, the initiative teaches the art of communication, exchanging ideas, debate, and compromise. The strategy increases parental engagement, teacher morale, and student success at Alliance school campuses. During the 1999-2000 school year, there were 129 Alliance Schools serving 89,994 students in 20 Texas school districts. Texas Industrial Areas Foundation organizations began lobbying the Texas Legislature in 1993, eventually securing \$14 million in 1999 for the Investment Capital Fund, which directly funds schools committed to reform through local control and accountability.



A Federal Program: Full-Service Community Schools

The [U.S. Department of Education](#) supports an initiative called the Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) Program. It was re-authorized under Title IV through Community Support for School Success, sections 4621-4623, and 4625 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The FSCS Program provides support for the planning, implementation, and operation of full-service community schools that improve the coordination, integration, accessibility, and effectiveness of services for children and families, particularly for children attending high-poverty schools, including high-poverty rural schools.

FSCS provide comprehensive academic, social, and health services for students, students' family members, and community members that will result in improved educational outcomes for children. These services may include:

- High-quality early learning programs and service.
- Accelerated learning aligned with academic support and other enrichment activities, providing students with a comprehensive academic program.
- Family engagement, including parental involvement, parent leadership, family literacy, and parent education programs.
- Mentoring and other youth development programs.
- Community service and service-learning opportunities.
- Programs that provide assistance to students who have been chronically absent, truant, suspended, or expelled.
- Job training and career counseling services.
- Nutrition services and physical activities.
- Primary health and dental care.
- Activities that improve access to and use of social service programs and programs that promote family financial stability.
- Mental health services.
- Adult education, including instruction of adults in English as a second language.

In summary, community schools should represent a public education system that respects parents' rights, responds to students' needs, reinforces local decision-making based on the will of their communities, and uses all available resources to support student achievement.

About CPE

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) believes that accurate, objective information is essential to building support for public schools and creating effective programs to prepare all students for success. As NSBA's research branch, the Center for Public Education (CPE) provides objective and timely information about public education and its importance to the well-being of our nation. Launched in 2006, CPE emerged from discussions between NSBA and its member state school boards associations about how to inform the public about the successes and challenges of public education. To serve a wide range of audiences, including parents, teachers, and school leaders, CPE offers research, data, and analysis on current education issues and explores ways to improve student achievement and engage support for public schools.

About NSBA

Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a federation of state associations and the U.S. territory of the Virgin Islands. Through its member state associations that represent locally elected school board officials serving approximately 51 million public school students, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. We believe that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child, regardless of their disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status or citizenship, deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential.

For more information, visit nsba.org.